

## ARTISTIC TRADITIONS AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT OF THE STAGE PERFORMANCE PRACTICES AMONG WA (YUNNAN PROVINCE, CHINA)

*This paper investigates the market dynamics and social mobility of the Wa entertainers, who are involved in music, dance, and other performing arts within China's contemporary urban cultural tourism sector. Unlike intangible cultural heritage bearers, who are often elderly, the Wa entertainer community predominantly comprises young members from their own ethnic group. Through a series of oral history interviews and participant observation conducted by the author in Mashan Village, Yunnan Province (a primary source of the Wa artists) and Kunming City (a major destination), the study uncovers the diversity within the community. Key findings indicate that the living conditions and lifestyle choices of the Wa entertainers not only affect the vitality of the Wa song-and-dance performing arts scene but also the broader development of the ethnic group, given the dual embeddedness of the Wa artists in both urban and rural settings. To foster transformative growth among the Wa entertainers, the study proposes strategies that include transitioning from a live to a mediated performance, shifting from off-site professional endeavors to local artistic community integration, and increasing government investment in human capital, all while preserving traditional apprenticeship systems.*

**Keywords:** *Wa entertainers, performing arts field, cultural capitalization, social mobility, urban and rural areas, China*

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### Introduction

The Wa, a time-honored transboundary ethnic group rooted in China's southwestern frontier, trace their lineage back to the ancient Pu people. Their language falls within the Mon-Khmer family within the Austroasiatic language system. Globally, Wa communities are present in Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, with a marked concentration in northern Myanmar. Focusing on China, prior to the nation's founding in 1949, the Wa were solely found in Yunnan Province, residing in the Awa Mountain Area, a rich, subtropical region with complex geology. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Wa individuals have migrated to other parts of the country through a variety of social channels. As highlighted in the Wa genesis narrative *Si Mgang Lih*, the pivotal moment that



*Fig. 1. The Wa ethnic rock band performs at a music bar in Kunming, Yunnan.  
Photo by the author, 2023*

signified the Wa people's evolution into a civilized society, distinct from the animal world, was when they ventured out from Si Mgang, founded villages, cultivated the land, and embarked upon additional migrations.<sup>1</sup> Similar to the era of their ancestors, the new generation of Wa people is also "re-emerging from Si Mgang" to survive and develop. One of the groups worth our attention is the Wa young artists.

Since the 1990s, with the rapid development of China's cultural industry, Wa folk songs and dances have gradually stepped out of the Awa Mountain. They are loved by the vast audience for their original natural charm and unrestrained style. In the process of many visits to Ximeng Wa Autonomous County, Pu'er City, Yunnan Province, we found that the key to the good situation of the inheritance, innovation, and dissemination of Wa singing and dancing culture is that it has a heterogeneous but relatively complete inheritance group and system. In addition to inheritors at all levels of traditional music and dance projects under the state-led intangible cultural heritage system, as well as professional ethnic art troupes such as the Ximeng Ethnic Culture Team (the former Ximeng County Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe), there are also a group of market-oriented young artists who are actively inheriting the Wa ethnic song and dance culture. In terms of music, several well-known musicians with international influence have emerged, such as *Amei*, *Si Mgang Lih Band*, *Kawa Band*, *NZBZ*, etc., forming innovative musical genres such as "Yunnan Reggae", "Border Rap", and "Roots Rock". Regarding dance, the large-scale musical drama *Wa*

<sup>1</sup> *Si Mgang Lih* is the creation epic of the Wa people in Yunnan province, China. "Si Mgang" refers to the cave or gourd involved in the origin of human beings, while "Lih" means "come out" among each branch of the Wa people. It can be roughly divided into two different texts: "Man Out from the Cave" of the Wa branch and "Man Out from the Gourd" of the Burao branch.



Fig. 2. The band members perform wearing costumes that strongly reflect the Wa ethnic visual style. Photo by the author, 2023

*Tribe*, compiled and created by the Ximeng Ethnic Culture Team in 2011, entered China's premier art palace — the China National Centre for the Performing Arts, held two special performances, and toured in 7 provinces and 11 cities. In addition to these artists who have made certain professional achievements, more of my young Wa friends provide performance services in the field of entertainment, especially in the leisure and sightseeing activities in theme parks, tourist attractions, and other places. To refer to the difference between them and the above people, I call them “the Wa entertainers”. Their main export places are Cangyuan Wa Autonomous County and Ximeng Wa Autonomous County.

Unlike the artists engaged in the state-led intangible cultural heritage system (Wang, Zhang 2022), these Wa artists are mainly young people. The new generation serves as the primary performers in the cultural tourism industry, traversing vast distances and continuously engaging with mainstream culture. Unlike residents who have not ventured beyond their hometowns, these young artists amass substantial economic, social, and cultural capital. Most notably, while they rely heavily on the social networks of their home region, their livelihood and economic activities take place in the bustling markets of Chinese cultural tourism—primarily in metropolises like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Shenzhen, and other eastern coastal cities (Wu 2020). The seasonal migration of this youth cohort between urban and rural areas naturally engenders a “dual embeddedness” across economic, social, and cultural spectrums, linking cities and villages. Due to the industry's age constraints, these individuals are poised to return to their roots, positioning them as pragmatic agents in rural revitalization efforts.

However, the current survival situation of the Wa entertainers is undoubtedly worrying. Based on the field theory, Chen Yan pointed out the problems in this field: “The disorderly

development leads to chaotic admission; the lack of capital restricts the sustainable development of song and dance art; the exit reasons are different, so it is difficult to finish well” (Chen 2022). It should not be ignored that COVID-19 forced many Wa artists to stay at home for a long time, and then they had to deal with a market environment radically different from the one before the outbreak. According to the estimates of industry insiders, as far as Ximeng County is concerned, the number of Wa entertainers performing in scenic spots is now less than 100.

Many questions have prompted us to explore in depth: What are the origins of the Wa performing arts industry and its driving force and operational logic in different periods? What are their living conditions in the city? What kind of impact have they had on their hometowns after returning home? Against the background of China’s rural revitalization strategy, how should this group transform in the face of the industry’s uncertainty?

This study is based on a long-term survey of the Wa entertainers in Mashan Village, Mengka Town, Ximeng Wa Autonomous County, Pu’er City, Yunnan Province, China. In June 2021 and during the Spring Festival of 2022, I conducted fieldwork in Yongye Village (a subgroup of Masan Village), focusing on the lives of returning Wa entertainers in the community. In addition to an in-depth understanding of their daily life through participant observation, I also interviewed members of the community for personal life histories as an auxiliary research means. Such a combination of methods was not just a compromise under COVID-19, but I also believe that “in most cases, memories are explanatory. This means that not merely unconsciously reorganizing events, individuals change them by mentioning certain things to bring them back to memory. Even the simplest description contains beliefs and symbols shared by the community” (Hoppál 2020: 52) Personal life histories reveal fragments of history, and comparing them and identifying what they have in common makes it possible to link the lives of the same community in different times and spaces, and thus identify the key characteristics and patterns of behavior in a specific historical period.

There are 57 households and 216 residents in Yongye Village. After household surveys and interviews, it is estimated that 60 people, or 27.8% of the total population, have been engaged in the Wa performing arts industry. This study conducted in-depth interviews with 31 Wa entertainers, including members of the older, middle-aged, and younger generations, to understand their living conditions within and outside of the village community across various historical periods. At the same time, interviews were conducted with the head of the Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe of the Ximeng County Culture and Tourism Bureau to gain insights into the local government’s attitude and policies towards this industry. In subsequent research, I observed Wa entertainers performing at the Yunnan Ethnic Village (a vibrant cultural park), ethnic restaurants, and non-heritage bazaars in Kunming City, Yunnan Province, to further explore their urban lifestyles and working conditions. This research not only relied on oral data but also drew upon local archives and news reports for additional contextual information.

### **How the Wa Performing Art Industry Came into Being?**

According to a survey conducted by the Cultural and Tourism Department of Ximeng County, since the early 1990s, a total of three batches of peasants in Ximeng County have left their villages to engage in the Wa performing art industry. The first group of Wa entertainers was organized by the Ximeng County government to perform in the “Wa Village”, a folk village type attraction in the China Folk Culture Villages belonging to Shenzhen



Splendid China Development Co., Ltd. Shenzhen Splendid China Folk Village is a two-part theme park, combining “Splendid China” and “Chinese Folk Culture Villages” and realized the two parks as one in 2003. Because “Splendid China breaks through the original amusement park’s construction concept, innovates the original amusement park’s entertainment mode, and introduces the cultural theme that the amusement park does not have” (Dong 2016), it creates the miracle of “big investment, big output, fast recovery” of the tourist attraction, and is regarded as the milestone of China’s theme parks. Its success triggered the first round of theme park investment and construction fever.

The Chinese Folk Culture Villages opened in October 1991 and was the landing place for the first group of Wa entertainers in Ximeng County. The Chinese Folk Culture

Villages is the first large-scale cultural tour area in China, which gathers folk buildings, folk customs, and folk arts of various ethnic groups in one park. There are 22 villages in the typical ethnic style built in a 1:1 ratio, and “Wa Village” is one of them. In 1993, to fill up the content of the ethnic performance of the “Wa Village”, and the company hoped that “the Wa Village would be a place for the Wa people”, Ximeng County organized 20 to 30 Wa entertainers to perform specially arranged programs that could show ethnic characteristics and flavors, and one of the well-known ones was the Magical Awa Mountain. After accumulating some experience in the folk village, the members of this group of Wa entertainers spread out to various places and gradually became the leaders of the performing arts teams in various scenic spots.

The great success of Shenzhen Splendid China Folk Village marked the formal entry of China’s tourism industry into the “theme park era”. During this period, several “ethnic villages”, “style parks”, “expo parks” and other “folk village” type tourism products have sprung up. The mode of “artificial landscape & folk performance” not only meets the static viewing needs of tourists but also lets them participate dynamically. Thus, this approach was quickly



Fig. 3. A Wa ethnic artist performs a welcoming act at the entrance of a restaurant in Pu'er, Yunnan.

Photo by the author, 2023

copied by many places at a time when there was a relative shortage of tourism products. In this context, the demand for the Wa entertainers in the scenic spots has surged. At the same time, the Wa people seem to possess natural talents in singing and dancing, making them popular among tourists and valuable to investors in scenic areas. From 1993 to 2002, the Wa entertainers who had entered the industry first began to recruit a large number of youths of the same ethnicity to enter the industry, and they gradually grew up to become the organizers and operators of the performance teams. When recruiting new members, they would give priority to their family members, that is, close relatives and in-laws, and then extend to the same clan, village, hometown, and other friends. There is no special age limit, but the co-ethnicity is the premise. According to the participants, the key reason was the deep skin color characteristic of the Wa. Like other Mon-Khmer-speaking groups, the Wa are mostly dark-skinned. At that time, the Wa was not well known to most domestic Chinese travelers, and some tourists were even startled when they occasionally heard the Wa performers speak Yunnan dialect or Mandarin because they mistook them for foreigners. When they learn that these people are actually Chinese, tourists often ask, “Are there any Wa people among the 56 ethnic groups in China?” In this case, the Wa’s distinctive physical characteristics have become a symbol of “exoticism”, making them the main selling points and recruitment conditions (*Fiskesjö* 2015: 497–523).

According to the recollection of the participants at that time, most of the young Wa entertainers were hired to play the roles of Africans, Maoris, and Amerindians. The only exception was Shenzhen Splendid China, where the “Chinese Wa” brand name was openly displayed. In 2002, in the “Window of the World”, an exotic theme park with “Give me a day, I give you a world” as the slogan, the staff responsible for the African, Maori and American Indian culture performances were all Wa people. Among them, more than 20 people dance African, and more than 10 people dance Maori. Thus, at this stage, theme park investors were not investing in Wa culture, but in its commercial potential — they were gradually realizing that the “exotic” Wa culture had some market potential (*Fiskesjö* 2015: 497–523).

The first decade of the 20th century was an important period of China’s reforms, opening up, and modernization drive. Under the requirements of economic transformation, “various inherited and even new festival symbols strongly focus on their economic role, which is a new phenomenon in the economy of ethnic minorities” (*Ma* 2001a). In order to promote economic development, in Ximeng Wa Autonomous County, the county Party Committee and government held the first “Yunnan Ximeng Wa Wooden Drum Festival” from April 10 to 12, 2003. During the festival, a large-scale art performance was held, which consisted of the folk performance of the Wa villages and a bonfire party. In 2004, it was renamed “China Wa Wooden Drum Festival”, which would be held from April 11 to 13 every year. Although the activities within each festival are different, each township village has to show a song and a dance. This provides a field for folk artists to perform songs and dances, resulting in representative literary and artistic works composed, directed, and performed by folk artists.

Sai, a provincial non-genetic inheritor from Mashan Village, Mengka Town, Ximeng County, has learned and created the Wa dance by himself since he became the leader of the village literature and art team at the age of 18. He expressed the contents of his production and life in the form of dance. The modified “Wooden Drum” added performance movements such as fist clenching, foot stamping, leg lifting, front lifting, and hair shaking, which further enriched the form and dance vocabulary. He has participated in the “Wooden Drum Festival”, rural amateur performance competitions and other cultural activities. At the same time, he led the team to perform in Beijing, Fujian, Shanghai, Chongqing, Jiangxi, Hebei,



*Fig. 4.* One of the pioneering Wa entertainers from Mashan Village who ventured out to perform is now teaching his grandson to play the Wa flute. Photo by the author, 2022

and other places, making it the first batch of artists to leave their hometown for performance.

The personal practice of Sai's Ethnic Culture capitalization shows that the new ethnic festival represented by the Wa Wooden Drum Festival promotes the development of the Wa performing art industry at two levels. First, economic interests drive local governments, local enterprises, and cultural holders to more actively explore national cultural resources, including singing and dancing, and develop them into demonstrative tourism products, so as to obtain more economic income. The second is to guide the change of values. The cultural festivals attract a lot of people, make the cultural holders fully realize their own cultural value, and meet the needs of modern tourism consumption. "The expansion of the scope of sending and receiving of festival symbols makes it possible, first of all, to overcome narrow ethnocentrism, and, more importantly, to enable people from other ethnic groups, outsiders, and foreigners to better integrate into the cultures of these nations. It not only understands the culture of these nations, but also understands the huge potential economic resources of these nations from the process of receiving information, which can lead to the investment of real and potential economic capital and the establishment of new development models" (Ma 2001b). As the economic and social impact of the Wooden Drum Festival continues to expand, the government, companies, and tourists are paying more and more attention to Wa culture, triggering a positive interaction between ethnic culture and tourism development. Specifically, tourism venues began to hire Wa entertainers to rehearse Wa songs and dances for special performances. Despite the limitations on the scale of the tourist attractions and labor costs, the Wa entertainers needed to learn many forms of songs and dances at the same time, including the folk songs and dances of other ethnic groups in China such as the Tibetans, Zhuang,

and Miao, as well as foreign dances such as the Hawaiian hula and street dances. However, nowadays tourists can already distinguish, recognize, and appreciate Wa folk songs and dances. The Wa entertainers also regarded these studies as a self-improvement. At this point, the Wa performing art industry became a new social reality, achieved through a combination of state support (i.e., state support for cultural development that benefits the nation) and the economic process of transforming cultural matters into new commodities (i.e., the capitalization of national culture).

In August 2014, the original Wa musical drama Wa Tribe was successfully performed at the China National Center for the Performing Arts. The Ximeng County Ethnic Culture Team became the first county-level ethnic culture team to enter the highest art palace in China. In the same year, with the support of the Ximeng County Government, Ximeng Wa Tribe Culture Co., Ltd. was formally established, responsible for organizing the training of Wa singing and dance performances, and delivering performers to major scenic spots such as “Window of the World” in Shenzhen, Beijing Happy Valley, and Yunnan Ethnic Village. However, in addition to the human resources platform of “Wa Mountain Song and Dance”, which the Ximeng County government hopes to rely on the Ximeng Wa Tribal Culture Co., Ltd., more and more formal organizations and informal groups are “entering”.

In this industry, formal organizations are registered enterprises, while informal organizations adopt a business model similar to small workshops, which industry insiders call “team” or “art troupe”. Such groups are usually formed by an original artist who is familiar with the routines of performances, has certain choreography skills, and contacts with the boss of the scenic spot. Such people are often known as “captains”, plus several relatives as core members. With the relationship with the owner or the person in charge of the scenic spot, the captain can know the requirements of the scenic spot for the number of people and the requirements of the program content, and can recruit, train and select the team members in his or her hometown as needed.

Former Wa artists working alone provide opportunities for new people to join. Xiao Long, a Wa girl from Man Village, is 25 years old and has seven brothers and sisters. After graduating from primary school at the age of 14, she never continued to study because her family could not afford her tuition fees. In order to provide for her brother to go to school, she got acquainted with the then captain Yang Jie through the introduction of her hometown, and he encouraged her to go out to perform. Her monthly salary has risen from 600 yuan to around 5,000 yuan today.

However, such an informal economy, which relies on the gradual expansion of interpersonal networks, is not yet well regulated, thus facing many challenges in the business process. According to the captain Yang Jie, the current problems are: being unable to provide formal invoice to the customer, to receive the public account transfer; to handle the performance certificate (he often can only choose to cooperate with private investment scenic spots); to sign labor contract with entertainers, and to purchase accident insurance for them. The captain of China, however, must handle all the affairs of the “big family” like a “parent”, but in addition to getting the same salary as the artists, he will only get a small bonus, which usually depends on the number of artists.

Under such circumstances, these teams often encounter various risks, especially once the scenic spot defaults on the travel allowance and the wages — in this case the team can go bankrupt and dissolve because of the low liquidity, often forcing the Wa artists to resign, job-hop or even change careers. According to the author’s statistics, the average



working period of entertainers in Mashan Village is 7.3 years, within which they have to change several jobs. Few people can be engaged in performance until retirement.

As an informal economy, the Wa performing art industry, in addition to its own internal defects, also has a subtle competition-cooperative relationship with the formal economy. The Ximeng Ethnic Culture Team (the former Ximeng County Ethnic Song and Dance Troupe) was founded in 1965. It is a performance group specializing in singing and dancing art performance with financial appropriation. It is now a public institution under the Bureau of Culture and Tourism of Ximeng County. The team is responsible for the important tasks of inheriting and carrying forward the traditional culture of the Wa people and meeting their growing cultural needs. The specific responsibilities include creation, performance, publicity and training of artistic talents. The Ximeng Ethnic Culture Team has created and arranged a large number of artistic performance products featuring Wa culture, which have won many awards in various competitions, and has been invited to perform in major cities at home and abroad. In addition, the troupe also trained a large number of ethnic singing and dancing talents with creative ability; some of the Wa artists who later underwent market-oriented transformation initially worked in the troupe.

Initially, song and dance works were taught to artists through training, and the troupe did not restrict their use of copyright. However, during the market-oriented performance, the Wa entertainers had to add some acrobatics and entertainment effects in order to give the show more visual impact. This practice is seen by the troupe as a distortion of the traditional Wa culture. The troupe and the Wa entertainers face different “stages”, that is, perform for different audience groups. The differences in approach have led the troupe to temporarily withdraw the right to use their own dance and accompaniment music.

Exploring the development of the Wa performing arts industry since the early 1990s, and comparing the driving force and operation logic in different periods, we can identify the development difficulties and potential crises encountered by the industry. The defects of the informal economy itself and the lack of overall planning for this informal economy have led to a certain degree of chaos in the industry, resulting in great uncertainty in the work and life of the Wa entertainers. However, the Wa artists are mostly young people of their own ethnicity. They are not only the actors of this region, but also the inheritors of their own culture. In the face of expanding social communication, their living state and lifestyle are not only crucial for the survival of the Wa performance art industry, but also intimately tied to the development of the ethnic community, which urgently requires our attention.

### **Community Life and Symbol Interaction**

The Wa entertainers generally graduate from junior high school, aged about 16 or 17, and enter inland cities. This period is a critical stage for them to shape their personal values and norms of conduct. In a completely different cultural environment, the Wa youth must actively participate in community life in order to establish a foothold as soon as possible. For those Wa entertainers who work in the scenic area, the art troupe provides them with the basic framework of social life. Under the premise of preserving their cultural traditions, the art troupe enables them to play the reference and expressive function of cultural symbols, thus playing a decisive role in organizing the community life of the Wa entertainers.

The activities around the performance are the center of the social life of the art troupe members. Weekends and legal holidays are often the concentrated periods of performance

activities thus the labor and leisure time of Wa artists is reversed compared to that of ordinary people. Therefore, they generally do not set a fixed rest day, but use a shift system for rest and work arrangements as needed.

The daily performance is arranged according to the number of visitors to the park. For example, since the opening hour, one performance is performed every half an hour, each lasting one hour. An average of 5–6 performances per day is normal. In addition to the stage performances, the artists also need to receive daily training. The training mainly consists of working on physical fitness, flexibility, and rehearsals of commercial performances. The physical labor paid by entertainers to ensure the smooth completion of the performance is hard. A Wa girl recalled that after joining the troupe, she had to get up at 5 am to run, practice, then perform, often exhausted at the end of the day. When there is no performance arrangement, the art troupe adopts a closed management and participants have to ask for leave to go out. Also because the scenic area is generally located in the suburbs at a certain distance from the downtown area, the interpersonal communication is limited between the art troupe and colleagues, leaders and audience in the scenic area. Even so, these young people have far more contacts than their peers in the village society, and they constantly strive to expand their interpersonal relationships by organizing community activities and gatherings.

The young Wa people get together from time to time. These gatherings may be spontaneous or specifically organized, either private or public, for recreational or cultural purposes. The analysis of these social activities helps us to explore whether the characteristics and functions correspond to the traditional customs in the village, and how the Wa youth in the “cultural enclave” can establish contact with other ethnic colleagues and friends through the cultural strategy of symbol exchange and meaning sharing.

The most important public social event is the festival. The older generation of the Wa entertainers in Mashan Village recalled the New Rice Festival they had outside. The New Rice Festival is a traditional festival shared by the Wa, Lahu, and Dai ethnic groups in Ximeng County. The time for the New Rice Festival is set on the 14th to 16th of the eighth lunar month of each year. Generally, every family in the Wa village will choose a “good day” according to their rice maturity, and go to the field to pick up new crops and make rice porridge. For the Wa artists outside, the time for the festival is not fixed. Generally, they find a rest day in the eighth month of the lunar calendar and cook porridge with the new rice that their family members specially sent to them. This act is intended to taste new rice with the family members so that it can protect their peace and happiness outside. However, the latest generation of the Wa entertainers no longer celebrate the New Rice Festival, but mainly celebrate Chinese traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, the Dragon Boat Festival, and the Mid-Autumn Festival. Part of the reason is that the elders in the family are not around to host the sacrificial ceremony. Thus, the festivals of all kinds tend to be consistent. More importantly, “These festivals are celebrated by everyone, and if we invite them, our colleagues and even our bosses will spend them with us.” In other words, shared festivals achieve social communication in expanded interactions, in which symbols from different cultural backgrounds work together and constantly interact, forming a complex structure and rich library of elements.

Let us take The Spring Festival as an example. First, the Wa Youth will choose a place to build firewood stoves and fires. Experienced scenic owners usually set up a small kitchen for ethnic minority employees. There is often an open space in front of the kitchen, which can be used for singing and dancing activities. The Festival begins with food preparation — food

is the most important part of the gathering, which is not different from what we observed during the Spring festival in Mashan village, but in the village, given the demand for meat such as cooking porridge and roast, people often choose to slaughter domestic pigs as food supplies. The Wa entertainers cannot do this, so they will go to the market to buy pork and chicken, as well as various frozen skewers for convenient barbecue. Porridge is the most typical Wa dish. Cooking rice, meat, vegetables, and salt into a pot of thick porridge, is essential for festivals and entertaining guests. I have eaten chicken porridge, pork porridge, beef sausage porridge, vegetable porridge, and pickles porridge in Mashan village. Whether in Wa villages or cities, “ethnic cuisine is one of the few things that have brought communities together” (Hoppál 2020: 137) Even for those young people who left home, they don’t do the ceremony, but remember all kinds of porridge dishes, production process and taste, and share them in colleagues, friends’ birthday parties or wedding ceremonies, clearly showing that the food code is one of the main characteristics of this kind of social activities. For the group, sharing a traditional diet “makes every member of the group feel involved in the tradition”. Furthermore, recalling the “taste of hometown” alleviates the cultural shock when adapting to the city culture and other cultures; for people with different cultural backgrounds, eating habits are the “symbol code” of the group most easy to perceive and identify (Hoppál 2020: 138). When entertainers communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds, ethnic dishes such as Wa porridge and barbecue “have the significance of culture and provide a way for outsiders to explain culture” (Zheng 2017). More importantly, in this process, the Wa artists not only accept it but even consciously simplify or choose the form of sharing in the interaction with the outsiders. For example, the Wa people like to eat spicy food. In addition to ginger, garlic, coriander, and citronella, there are special ingredients in porridge and bar-



Fig. 5. The "Yuwo" Wa art troupe is performing live in the village.  
Photo by the author, 2022

becue, such as wild pepper, usually planted in the front and back of the house, which is the source of the special aroma of Wa cuisine. This is a necessary item for the Wa artists when they leave home. But in city parties, to adapt to more people's tastes, they choose to use fewer chili peppers, not stimulating wild pepper, or dressing alone, rather than adding dipping while cooking as in the village. So food does not have to be very authentic, improvements and innovations are acceptable because it is symbolic.

Culture has inheritance and transmission. Ethnosemiotics claims that, in order to steadily transmit unique information, specific cultures will use multiple symbols at the same time: "The diversity and simultaneous use of codes are the universal characteristics of culture" (Xia *Xun-xiang* 2020). In festival activities, we can observe the juxtaposition of various codes, such as diet, language, body, spatial relationship patterns, etc. These codes alternate with each other and jointly shape the structural characteristics of festival activities. At the same time, in some links, the importance of a particular code is highlighted.

Another cultural symbol that cannot be ignored in the Spring Festival gathering of young Wa people is music. When preparing food, someone plays the music on a trolley stereo, the playlist includes Yunnan Reggae (especially the music of the *Wa Kawa*, *Perman* and other bands), electric music (short video soundtracks of the Wa celebrities on Kuaishou and TikTok) and Wa pop music. These are the new forms of Wa music, but no traditional Wa tone can be heard.

After food, singing and dancing as the code of the body becomes important. Usually, the Wa youth use their mobile phones to connect to the Bluetooth stereo to play pop songs and sing with microphones. The singing code and the dancing code are constantly switched. When they are in a mood, they will also dance other ethnic dances they have learned in daily rehearsals, such as the lyrical Tibetan dance *Zhuoma*, which is often used as a supplement between the intense rhythms of the Wa dance.

In the community activities of the Wa entertainers, several codes of food, music, singing, and dance most often participate in the symbolic construction of nationality and identity and the exchange of symbols among different cultures. More precisely, these traditions are often consciously selected as expressions of ethnicity, and only a few cultural elements are needed to gain symbolism in the new cultural environment.

The daily practice of the Wa entertainers constantly reproduces this model, which mainly transforms the function of cultural symbols from condensing the emotions within the community to the representation of external expression, and becomes a new source of pride. We can say that this is the "self-reference system" (Luhmann 2006: 37–57), where the system produces its own operation and allows the system to continue to operate. But at the same time, the system is not totally closed: "If the new elements are not within the system, the system will be open to the environment, bring the new elements into the system, and the system boundary will be widened outward" (Xing, Huang 2021).

### Dual Embedding between Urban and Rural Areas

Previous studies on rural floating populations in economic anthropology have predominantly focused on issues of de-embedding and cultural change. However, in the case of the Wa entertainers we observe that they are not merely unable to disengage from their local society; rather, they are doubly embedded into it due to their reliance on local social ties. This ultimately manifests as a dual embedding between urban and rural areas, embodied



Fig. 6. The Single-String Lyre performance team is rehearsing. Photo by the author, 2022

in economic, relational, and cultural dimensions. Primarily, we encounter economic embedding. The Wa performing arts industry emerged as a means of livelihood and an ethnic economic model crafted by certain Wa individuals amid the burgeoning cultural tourism sector in the 1990s—a pivotal era of economic transformation in China. They capitalize on their “experience-near” insights (Geertz 1983), particularly their embodied experiences in music and dance, resonating with the outsider perception that “ethnic minorities are naturally gifted in singing and dancing.” Therefore, the industry itself exemplifies the embedding of the economy within culture. More specifically, as an export-oriented economic activity, economic embedding is evident in the urban lives of the Wa entertainers, reflected in aspects like economic income and consumption patterns. Conversely, the embedding extends in the opposite direction, notably manifested when Wa artists who earn income in cities remit savings to their kin residing in their hometowns. This forms a crucial component of household wage income.

Secondly, relationship embedding is evident in the urban context through the formation of a “cultural enclave” (Castile, Kushner 1981: 203–204) by the Wa entertainers. This enclave, a heterogeneous cultural island within the urban social landscape, operates as a both closed and open system. Its closure is rooted in the preservation of distinct cultural traits such as language, diet, music, and dance, fostering a community that mirrors their native culture. This results in a relatively isolated space where members easily cultivate a sense of trust and security. For instance, when a Wa girl, Ye, tried to connect with someone outside her troupe, she was discouraged by the leader due to a general distrust of outsiders. A case in point is Wa youth Kan, who once left the group to pursue solo performance ventures in bars, dance halls, and other small venues, a phase he referred to as “rushing”.



However, upon suffering financial setbacks, he was welcomed back into the fold by the former leader, illustrating the supportive nature of the enclave, acting as a safety net for its members during times of hardship. On the other hand, the openness of the enclave is demonstrated by its inevitable engagement with external influences such as corporate culture and urban society. The Wa entertainers actively integrate into urban life, as evidenced by their efforts to learn Mandarin despite restrictions. Moreover, respected leaders within the troupe forge personal connections with influential figures in the tourism industry.

In conclusion, the relationship embedding experienced by the Wa entertainers in urban settings showcases a complex interplay between closure and openness, further complicated by the inherent instability of the art troupe as an informal economic organization. Driven by the fluctuating tourism industry, the periodic relocation of these troupes between provinces and cities challenges the continuity of social relations, yet contributes to the community's cohesion. The "cultural enclave" is not merely a self-contained bubble but a dynamic space that can function as a training ground for experiencing urban lifestyles, a platform for upward mobility, and a safety net when integrating into urban society.

In the countryside, the degree of relationship embedding is limited but also visible. This is mainly reflected in the social capital carried by the Wa entertainers "entering the countryside" to promote the construction and development of the original township and produce positive spillover effects. Through work, the experienced and active Wa entertainers can often accumulate a certain interpersonal network in the city, which can be effectively transformed into the related fields of rural areas and agricultural development under appropriate opportunities and conditions (Zhong, Jian 2010). A captain who has been in the industry for nearly 20 years told me that several scenic spot owners that she has cooperated with for a long time will come to Ximeng to support her work from time to time, and intend to invest in hotels in Mashan village. It can be seen that the addition of certain heterogeneous social capital carried by the returning Wa entertainers brings "the possible investment of economic capital and the establishment of new development models" (Ma 2001b) in the countryside.

Thirdly, cultural embedding involves the interplay between the village social culture that Wa artists bring into their urban workspaces and the urban and industrial cultures that permeate their original rural settings, driving changes in rural culture. From an ethnic semiotics perspective, cultural embedding is a constellation of symbolic incorporations, encompassing language, bodily expression, clothing, festivities, and customary practices. We've previously explored how the Wa entertainers employ diverse symbols to construct meaning within urban contexts, thereby elucidating their strategies for cultural embedding in urban environments. Here, our focus shifts to the reciprocal process of urban culture's infiltration into Wa culture, highlighting the dynamic intercultural dialogue.

In terms of employment, the norms of the modern enterprise system represent a form of heterogeneous embedding for the Wa youth. Their rural lifestyle, characterized by autonomous control over work schedules, contrasts sharply with the regimented environment of the scenic areas, where they must adhere to strict timetables and closed management. Initially, most Wa entertainers feel constrained by this new structure, but over time, they adapt and come to respect the rules of modern enterprises. In their day-to-day interactions, the theme park setting creates a unique milieu for multi-ethnic coexistence in the city (Peng 2016). Within this "backstage," various ethnic groups engage in communication and exchange, each bearing its own symbolic system. These small ethnic "cultural enclaves"

create a vibrant cultural space filled with diverse languages, complex ideas, and distinct customs, contrasting with the Mandarin-dominated urban culture. In this regard, the theme park functions as a “third space” (Bhabha 1994), enabling multiple cultures to interact and cross-reference each other. This facilitates a dialogue where cultures, despite their content differences and sharing formal similarities, can achieve mutual benefits and positive synergy, collectively enhancing their developmental potential (Ren 2008). The phenomenon of cultural coupling can also be reflected by observing the rural song and dance landscape. Songs and dances learned by the Wa entertainers from other ethnic groups in tourist spots are reintroduced to their home villages, enriching local performances and daily recreational activities. This cross-pollination not only enhances individual cultural capital but also diversifies the village’s song and dance repertoire.

In a word, the dual embedding of the Wa entertainers between cities and villages, on the one hand, constructs the economic and social structure based on ethnicity in the city, and provides a beneficial mechanism for their members to continuously seek suitable identity positioning between cities and villages; on the other hand, it can also be regarded as a way to integrate modernity into rural areas. The role of the Wa entertainers as a “cultural bridge” between urban and rural areas offers a critical foundation for exploring strategies for transformation and sustainable development. This is particularly pertinent for discussions around the implementation of China’s rural revitalization policy, which seeks to navigate the complexities and uncertainties faced by communities in transition.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the level of engagement between young individuals and rural communities, certain academics segment rural youth into three distinct categories: urbanized youth who have fully integrated into urban life, migrant youth who have encountered urban life yet maintain links to their rural origins, and indigenous rural youth who have spent a significant portion of their lives in rural areas (Xia Zhu-zhi 2019). Typically, urbanized youth exhibit little inclination to revert to rural settings, whereas rural youth frequently confront challenges such as a weak sense of agency and a scarcity of resources.

The Wa entertainers, functioning as migrant workers who have not undergone full urbanization, have garnered significant economic, social, and human capital through their professional mobility. This accumulation serves as a pivotal latent resource for advancing the rural revitalization efforts within the regions inhabited by the Wa community. However, limited by the general low education level of practitioners and the inherent defects of the informal economy, this group still faces severe challenges in achieving development and transformation in a highly uncertain environment. To this end, this paper discusses three aspects: from offline to online performance, “one area, one industry” in the off-site to on-site, and government investment in human capital to further promote the transformation of the Wa entertainers’ group.

Let us analyze the first one, the shift from live performance to mediated performance. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted urban tourism in China, leading to the suspension or digital adaptation of most live shows at tourist sites. As a result, the Wa entertainers, who once relied heavily on live performances for their income, faced considerable constraints. During this time, numerous Wa artists returned to their rural homes, finding themselves unexpectedly confined to the countryside. In response, some

Wa performers have leveraged their singing and dancing abilities to create “cloud-based” performances via new media platforms like short video apps and live streaming services, thereby visualizing and symbolizing their rural life experiences. Some of these individuals harnessed their accumulated fanbase and influence to generate income by promoting and selling rural agricultural products. Such media practices offer a novel and efficient pathway for the capital accumulation and career transformation of the Wa entertainers: they not only tap into various platform benefits and product sales for financial gain but also redefine their identities and roles through media engagement, transitioning from returning performers to online celebrities and ultimately evolving into “new farmers”. Although travel in China has largely shaken off the shackles of the pandemic, whether Wa ethnic artists will continue to maintain their media presence or return to live performance remains an open question requiring further investigation.

Another point is the motto “one area, one industry” in the shift of the performances from off-site to on-site venues. In the past, many Wa entertainers migrated from rural areas to the provincial capital of Kunming, and even to coastal cities in eastern China, in pursuit of greater opportunities. The new form of local industry emerging from their return is particularly noteworthy, as it concerns the future development and sense of belonging for these young individuals. For example, Mashan village, one of the export places of the Wa entertainers, occupies an important position in the history of the Wa at large. It is historically recognized as the first tribal settlement established by the Wa after they departed from Si Mgang. Today, owing to its abundant natural resources and the relatively intact preservation of the traditional Wa lifestyle, Mashan has the potential to evolve into a village with distinctive ethnic cultural features. Various levels of government have consecutively designated Mashan as a “National Key Village for Rural Tourism”, a “National Model Village for Ethnic Unity”, and a “Famous Tourism Village” in Yunnan province.

Driven by rural tourism, there is an obvious labor backflow trend in Mashan. Rural families diversify their income by hosting guests in their homes, thus combining farming activities with entertainment and education. Young people are selling Wa characteristic agricultural products and handicrafts through TikTok and other live-streaming platforms, while women have set up Wa Brocade cooperatives, which have successfully secured orders from many enterprises. Under the guidance of provincially recognized national intangible cultural heritage inheritors, the village has formed the “Yuwo” Wa art troupe and the Single-String Lyre performance ensemble; most of the members are the Wa entertainers who previously performed elsewhere. It can be seen that Mashan is at a critical juncture of transformation of the “one area, one industry” approach, moving from off-site to on-site. To achieve this transition and facilitate the return and stability of the Wa entertainers, it is essential to harness the synergistic power of mechanisms such as rural tourism, e-commerce, and the cultivation of farmer cooperatives, creating a supportive ecosystem that nurtures both cultural heritage and economic growth.

The next aspects are mentoring and human capital investment. As mentioned above, there are significant differences between the singing and dancing programs performed by the Wa entertainers and the “Wa tune” and the “circle dance” performed by the elderly people in the villages. These programs are carefully created by dedicated personnel and are characterized by intense rhythmic drums and exaggerated body movements. The series of physical skills used by the Wa entertainers in their performance are mastered through pre-employment training. However, their learning style is still rooted in the traditional lo-

cal inheritance mechanism, because the training still adopts the “mentoring” method, and its effectiveness is closely related to the physical sense that the Wa entertainers have long acquired in the village society.

The concept of “mentoring” underscores that the Wa entertainers typically learn without formal instruction from professional instructors, instead acquiring skills directly from seasoned performers. These experienced practitioners not only recruit newcomers to the field but also face the challenge of imparting their craft. Regarding dance learning, given its heavy reliance on bodily intuition, accurately emulating seasoned performers becomes crucial. Typically, the mentors will first exhibit the movements, elucidating the nuances of each gesture, before allowing learners to attempt them independently. Learners must meticulously recollect every detail of the mentor’s demonstration, paying close attention to nuanced body postures, gestures, and expressions. Through persistent refinement of their movements and stances, learners cultivate a personal “body sense” evolving into a deeply ingrained physical habit. This method of honing physical habits via imitation stands as the paramount technique for enhancing the human capital of the Wa entertainers.

However, the effectiveness of this learning method hinges on the availability of mentors and resources (Zhong, Jian 2010). Within the village society, the younger generation acquires singing and dancing skills through direct participation in festivals and ceremonies, emulating the elders—referred to as *dax* in the Wa language, signifying respect and seniority. Elders may not provide detailed explanations but are quick to correct mistakes and respond to inquiries. Despite being repeatedly asked questions, they remain patient, embodying the ideal mentorship role. Yet, the repertoire of traditional “Wa Tone” and “Circle Dance” is inherently limited. Through daily labor, the Wa people develop a wealth of embodied knowledge, manifesting as an intuitive understanding of rhythm, coordination, and more. For young Wa entertainers, these embodied experiences hold the potential to transform into tangible economic capital within the performance field, but they must align with the physical techniques demanded by the performance domain. Consequently, for ambitious Wa artists seeking personal growth and professional development, relying solely on inherited knowledge or individual experience proves insufficient. Therefore, investing in human capital for the Wa entertainers is paramount, with education serving as the primary avenue. Prior to leaving their hometowns, entertainers should be equipped with the support of governmental bodies with pertinent information and skill sets, facilitating their integration into performing groups. Tourism enterprises, in turn, bear responsibility for offering professional training opportunities to artists as a complement to traditional mentorship practices. It is incumbent upon governmental agencies to construct a platform tailored to the needs of the Wa entertainers, ensuring that the human capital amassed off-site is efficiently channeled back into rural and agricultural sectors. This would significantly contribute to rural revitalization, bearing profound strategic implications.

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